

# [***DeSantis Controversial Policies Spark Florida Convention Cancellations As Tourism Shows Signs Of Slowing***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:68NR-5MF1-JBCM-F0JB-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Length:** 1145 words

**Byline:** Alison Durkee, Forbes Staff

**Highlight:** The convention dropouts come amid other signs that crowds at Florida s major theme park attractions are down.

**Body**

**Topline**

A growing number of conventions and conferences are refusing to hold events in Florida in response to the state s political climate, as Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis and state lawmakers controversial policies involving LGBTQ rights and race have prompted a backlash that could hurt a key part of Florida's economy adding to a broader slowdown in tourism sectors like theme parks.

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The Orange County Convention Center in Orlando, Florida

Universal Images Group via Getty Images

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**Key Facts**

At least five groups have canceled planned events in Orange County, where Orlando is located, or announced plans to hold them elsewhere, the**Orlando Sentinel**reports.

**Game of Thrones**convention Con of Thronescanceledits event due to the increasingly anti-humanitarian legislation and atmosphere in Florida, for instance, while the National Society of Black Engineers moved its 2024 convention from Orlando to Atlanta,sayingthe state s political climate seeks to undermine what we stand for.

Tourism officials in Fort Lauderdale also report at least six organizations have pulled out of holding their events in Broward County, where the city is located, due to concerns about the state s policies, local outlet 7News Miamireports.

Local officials projected to thethe cancellations would cost the county s economy more than $20 million, taking into account lost revenue from hotel bookings, transportation, food and other travel costs.

The Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning moved its conference from Miami to Chicago,sayingit would pay a steep penalty for moving the event but members had expressed significant concerns about holding the event in Florida, particularly in light of the state s controversial educational policies targeting diversity initiatives.

In a statement to**Forbes**, DeSantis spokesperson Jeremy Redfern described the spate of cancellations as a media-driven stunt and pointed to Florida s record tourismnumbersin the first quarter of 2023.

**Tangent**

There are broader signs tourism in Florida is on the decline specifically in the Orlando area though other factors besides ***politics*** are likely at play. The Orange County Comptroller s officereportedcollections from a tourist development tax in May were down 6.7% from May 2022, after April tax figures weredownby 3.5% from April 2022. That marks the first time there have been two consecutive decreases since February 2021, and hotel occupancy in the Orlando area in May was down 2.5% from a year earlier. Analysts cited by thealso report crowds in Walt Disney World over the July 4 holiday were the slowest they ve been in nearly a decade, based on analysis of attraction wait times, a trend also hitting rival theme park Universal Orlando Resort. Those declines are at least partially because of families transitioning away from theme parks as pent-up demand following Covid-era closures has subsided, the**Journal**notes, and could also be a sign of visitors souring on widespreadprice increasesat Disney s theme parks.

**Big Number**

$7.75 billion. That s Florida s projected hotel revenue from business travel in 2022,accordingto the American Hotel and Lodging Association, part of $255 billion in business travel spending recorded nationwide in 2022 by the U.S. Travel Association. Conventions and conferences make up a sizable portion of Florida s tourism economy, whichcontributed$96.5 billion to the state s GDP in 2019 and employed 1.7 million people as of 2021, according toVisit Florida. Analysts cited by thenote Orlando is one of the top three cities in the country in terms of convention attendance and hotel rooms booked for conventions, and Visit Lauderdale told the publication that group travel including conventions makes up one-quarter of Broward County s tourism business.

**Chief Critic**

Redfern directed**Forbes**to a Bloombergarticlereporting Florida is among six Southern states that are contributing more to the national GDP than the Northeast, adding that under DeSantis leadership, Florida s economy is booming, with Florida being thefastest growing stateand having thelargestnet domesticin-migration.

**Contra**

Not all regions of the state are being affected by a drop in conventions and conferences, with officials in Tampatellingthe Florida Phoenix that no events have yet been canceled at the city s convention center for political reasons.

**What To Watch For**

How the state s tourism figures will play out from here. In the near term, Visit Orlando told thethat hotel bookings suggest the city will have similar tourist levels to 2022 through the summer, and tax collection data from June is expected to be higher due to an uptick in conventions. Any major hit to Florida s tourism industry as a result of conventions getting canceled is likely to be a longer-term trend, as many of the events pulling out of Florida were scheduled for next year and organizers often plan events years ahead of time. In Greater Fort Lauderdale, we have seen record tourism numbers through the first quarter of this calendar year, but as I said, group business books years in advance, Visit Lauderdale CEO Stacy Ritter told 7News.

**Key Background**

DeSantis and the Florida legislature have enacted a variety of controversial laws that have drawn national controversy, including restrictions on school instruction and classroom library books, bans on gender-affirming care, immigration restrictions, a six-week abortion ban and restrictions on drag shows. The state also publicly railed against an AP African-American Studies course for teaching woke ***politics***, drawing backlash. Florida s Parental Rights in Education law, known by critics as Don t Say Gay, has led to aprotracted battlebetween Disney and DeSantis after the company opposed the law, which is now playing out in court. The rash of policies has led to multiple civil rights groups issuing travel advisories against the state, including theNAACP, LGBTQ rights groupEquality Floridaand the League of United Latin American Citizens, urging Americans not to travel to Florida due to its hostile policies. Florida is openly hostile toward African Americans, people of color and LGBTQ+ individuals, the NAACP s travel advisorystates. Before traveling to Florida, please understand that the state of Florida devalues and marginalizes the contributions of, and the challenges faced by African Americans and other communities of color.

**Further Reading**

Orange County tourist tax tumbles again(Orlando Sentinel)

At least 6 organizations opt against holding conventions in Broward; some cite concerns over Florida s political climate (7News Miami)

National organization pulls conference out of Florida because of DeSantis' attacks on DEI(Tallahassee Democrat)

Some Conferences Steer Away From Florida, Citing State s Divisive Laws(Wall Street Journal)

Disney World Hasn t Felt This Empty in Years(Wall Street Journal)

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